

This is the fifth installment in a series submitted by Stow's Master Plan Committee to keep townspeople apprised of the issues it faces in drafting a Master Plan Update. Each installment is dedicated to a different major topic of the Master Plan. This article focuses on municipal services and infrastructure.

INFRASTRUCTURE: IT'S WHAT MAKES THE TOWN RUN

Submitted by the Master Plan Committee

By Nancy West and Michelle Ciccolo of The Ciccolo Group, LLC

Municipal services lie at the core of a community's operations – and survival. Encompassing the entire spectrum of infrastructure needs, the topic of municipal services also seeps into social services, education and even recreation. In general, when we talk about municipal services, we are talking about the range of functions that the town fulfills in order to keep all systems and departments up and running – which in turn keeps the community functioning smoothly. Usually, but not always, municipal services are funded by the Town's Operating Budget. Not every city or Town offers all of the range of services, and in general the smaller communities provide fewer services. However, core services usually consist of emergency response (police, fire, DPW).

Examples of municipal services can include the fire department, the police department, water and sewer provisions, electricity, road and highway maintenance, public housing, trash disposal and emergency response (ambulance). The next tier that could still be considered municipal falls under the rubric of social services: transportation and other forms of community care for seniors, health services and libraries. School services, while municipal, are funded separately in Massachusetts as a stand-alone appropriation and are therefore managed under a separate system. Needless to say, each of these functions plays a key role in the community, and the general wealth and size of the community is critical to how readily a community can fund the municipal services it desires. As a community grows, increases in residential or commercial population can impact the need for services. Therefore, even if all municipal services are running with ease right now, any discussions about future growth and development in the town need to take place within the context of the municipal services that will be required to support those changes.

There are essentially two ways that towns can approach the subject of municipal services. One is to look at every possible infrastructural need for the community, actual or potential, and figure out whether meeting that need is a priority and if so, how to do that. The other option is to consider it a priority to keep town services lean, offering only those services a community relies on for survival: emergency response, and road maintenance (snow removal). Both approaches are equally valid, but part of the purpose of the Master Plan is to clarify which approach the town wishes to take. Is the goal to foster safe and effective development plans by meeting as many emerging needs as possible, or to lessen the financial impact on taxpayers by maintaining a low but critical level of municipal services?

A quick perusal of the town's operating budget provides a useful overview of what is currently covered by Stow's municipal services. Decisions about growth, change in the community's demographics, and economic development in the community all impact what other possibilities the town might need to

explore. The School Committee recently released its own extensive master plan, which does a very effective job of spelling out the town's educational needs, and the Open Space and Recreation Plan also recently released, delves into issues of land Conservation and outdoor recreational facility needs. The Master Plan has an opportunity to further detail any additional needs not yet outlined in those plans and to help clarify goals and priorities for other municipal services which may need to be spelled out in future Capital Planning documents.

The overall goal of the MPC is to continue receiving input both from designated committees and from concerned residents. Help us identify the proper course of action for Stow's future. Participate in Master Plan Committee discussions (we generally meet on alternate Wednesdays – check the town website or schedule at the Town Building for exact dates and times); or contact the Master Plan Committee at 978-897-5098 or planning@stow-ma.gov.